

IKNotes

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Ethiopia **A Woman Innovator Speaks**

Six farmer innovators from Ethiopia took part in the recent international workshop on Promoting Local Innovation (PROLINNOVA), which was held in March 2004 at the Furra Institute of Development Studies in Yirgalem, Southern Ethiopia. Over 60 participants from Africa, Asia and Europe took part. They discussed experiences in building multi-stakeholder partnerships to promote participatory research and development that starts with recognizing the dynamics of indigenous knowledge. They visited farmer researchers and innovators in Southern Ethiopia and listened to the oral presentations of the farmers who came from more distant parts of the country.

One of these farmers was Mawcha Gebremedhin, a woman from Adwa in Tigray, the northernmost region in Ethiopia. She spoke with great self-confidence and pride about her achievements. Mawcha had been identified as an innovative woman farmer during the Indigenous Soil and Water Conservation (ISWC) project (1997–2002) coordinated by Mekelle University in Tigray. Mawcha originally caught the eye of the ISWC coordinator, Fetien Abay, when she observed Mawcha in a field ploughing with oxen.

This is an innovation that challenges the cultural norms in Ethiopia, where there is a long tradition of only men ploughing with oxen. Gradually, as the partners in the ISWC project started to become better acquainted with Mawcha and her work, they discovered that she was also innovating in many other ways in farming and natural resource management.

During the ISWC project, Mawcha had the opportunity to take part in a 10-day travelling seminar with several other farmer innovators in Tigray. They visited each other's farms, commented on each other's work and discussed how local and regional administrations as well as research and extension services could support farmer innovation. In ad-

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dition to this, Mawcha has often received visitors at her home—not only other farmers but also senior government officials and guests from overseas—and has told her story many times:

“My name is Mawcha Gebremedhin. I am 45 years old. After I was married to my husband, we begot a child. But then there came the 1984 drought and famine in the country and my husband was taken to a resettlement programme in the southern part of my country. The place he went was so far that he couldn’t come and see me. His departure was a big challenge for me and my son. I had to work as a daily labourer in the houses of many people to be able to feed my son and myself. I worked for more than 16 hours each day and yet I used to get only 10 Birr per month and something to eat. But it was very difficult for me to go on like that. I couldn’t carry on because the work did not bring enough for us and I couldn’t bear the ridicule of the other women in the village. Because I was working for other people, the women were not

even willing to talk to me as they used to do before my husband left. This made me decide to work on my own fields. I had been giving these to the family of my husband for farming, using our oxen for ploughing, and they gave me half of the harvest. The income I used to get from this sharecropped land was very meagre. Even though I supplemented it with the income I got from daily labour, it was still not enough. So I decided it would be better to spend my time on my field and plough by myself.

“In my area, women don’t plough. Ploughing is traditionally men’s work. Thus, I didn’t have the skill of ploughing. But because I was determined and faced a very pressing problem, I just boldly asked some men who had always been good to me. A couple of them laughed at me and advised me not to try. But, after my persistent requests, a couple of them showed me how to assemble the plough implements and how to handle the oxen. Thus, I started to plough my own fields by myself.

“In the beginning, some people considered me as an evil wisher who would cause many vicious things to happen in the village. Many people came and insulted me with very humiliating words. Some came and genuinely advised me to stop ploughing and to marry another husband or to sell local beer. This was a big pressure for me. I used to hide when people passed by. I had to bear all the problems, the ridicule and the laughter of people in my village who used to respect me before my husband left.

“After some time, I became good in the work. My fields were as good as the fields of the men. I harvested as much, if not more, than they did. That was a landmark for me and for my village. It was a strange thing for the people in my village. There is a saying in our village that the harvest from a woman’s field is not even enough for one meal. But my harvest was enough for months for both me and my son. I started sending him to school, even though it was difficult for me to take care of the oxen as well as do all the other farm activities without his help.

“The pressure from people did not lift, but it became much less. After some years, I forgot to be shy and became stronger. I continued to be vigilant and hard working. But then there came a new pressure from the relatives of my husband. As I said, in the previous years, I used to give them

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my land and they sharecropped it. But when I started to till it myself, they did not like this and became like enemies.

“I am not originally from the village where I now live. My husband took me from another village far away, so I do not have access to support from my own relatives. The relatives of my husband told me to leave their brother’s land and to go back to where I came from. But I couldn’t do that, because my mother and father were no longer alive by then. So I stuck to the land of my husband. His relatives started to hit my son and my oxen. I tried to get protection from the *Baito* [the village administration], which helped me to stay in the village.

“In the meantime, my husband came from the resettlement programme to the village and asked me to go there with him. He said he was getting richer there. But I refused. He, however, did the worst and most unexpected thing for me—he took my son with him. That was the worst day for me; I even thought to kill myself. I thought that my son would be my protection in the future, and all of a sudden I felt as if I had lost my future. But the *Baito* people were very cooperative and good. They consoled me and told my husband’s family that the land belongs to me and that they could be punished if something happened to me. This gave me strength and I continued to work hard.

“As I said, my harvest was very good, indeed even better than the harvest of some men in the village. Some villagers whose sons were in town and who were too old to continue ploughing asked me to till the land for them on a sharecropping basis. I accepted their offer and started tilling and sowing the land of four families. This was a big blow for the relatives of my husband, but a big strength for me. It had both economic and social advantages for me: I get half of the produce I harvest from their land, and the people have started to accept my strength and innovation. They said: ‘We used to laugh at you; now you laugh at us’.

“Four women whose husbands were sent for military assignment to the militia asked me to show them how to plough. I trained them and they tilled their land for years till their husbands came back. In addition, three schoolgirls who live in the village asked me to do the same, and I trained them and they are still tilling their land.

“In the meantime, the people from the Bureau of Agriculture gave me words of encouragement and things have become better for me. And, most important of all, people from Mekelle University heard about my innovation and came to me. They wrote down what I am doing and gave me a prize as top woman innovator, together with other women. Since then, they frequently visit me and give me advice and encouragement.

“After I started to till the land of the four families, I left the steeply sloping part of my land fallow. I left it to regenerate because that part was degraded and production started to decline. And, in fact, it was no longer necessary to plough that part of my land. I had enough for myself from what I got from the plots I was sharecropping. I made checkdams by carrying soil from other parts of my land. These dams stop the flood that washes down the soil from the mountain. I also sowed grasses to stabilize them. After long years, the land grew big trees. This again was a source of dispute with my neighbours and, of course, with my husband’s relatives. They tried to cut the trees and to take the grass. I had to guard the land, even at night. One day my husband’s relatives tried to hit me. In fact, they did. But I appealed to the *Baito* and they were punished. They were given a last warning that if anything happened to me they will be held accountable.

“Since then, I am using the grass for my oxen. The trees regenerated nicely and I use them whenever necessary. For instance, I cut the branches for fuel, I cut some strong branches for making the ploughshare, I sell them and many other things. I am also raising goats and sheep using the grass in my forest.

“Now with the help and encouragement I get from the *Baito*, the university, the Bureau of Agriculture and other visitors, I am leading a wonderful life. I built a house of my own. To do this, I have made my own road across the mountain to be able to transport the stones by car. Now I have a good house and am proud of it.

“Thank you.”

Just before Mawcha came to the workshop in Southern Ethiopia, she was working as a consultant in Tigray. The Adigrat Diocese Catholic Secretariat (ADCS) in the Eastern

Zone of Tigray recently launched a project to encourage women—especially some of the many women household heads—to plough their own land. ADCS hired Mawcha to train and advise them. She showed approximately 100 women how to work with oxen, how to fit the harness, how to handle the plough, and how to till the land. The women were much more confident in trying out this innovation since they were taught by a woman who is doing it herself.

This example shows that innovation comes about not merely by developing a new technology. Ploughing with oxen is an age-old practice in Tigray. What is new is that women are daring to plough, and thus to gain more income than if they gave out their land and oxen for sharecropping. In this case, the innovator had to sustain ridicule and be psychologically strong enough to persevere. Often, the most important support that development agents and local administrators can give is encouragement and protection, so that farmers feel free to innovate. This is especially important in the case of women, many of whom face greater challenges than men to be able to secure a livelihood for themselves and their children.